A Study of How Former High School Dropouts View the Reasons They Dropped Out and Why They Returned

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A STUDY OF HOW FORMER HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS VIEW

THE REASONS THEY DROPPED

OUT AND WHY THEY RETURNED

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

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by

Cristina Grace Brooks

June 2015

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ABSTRACT

There has been much research conducted regarding high school dropout prevention and identifying risk factors that influence those who choose to leave school early. Although research shows that life can become very difficult economically and socially for high school dropouts, some adults decide to return to further their education after many years away from a school setting. The following study was conducted in order to answer the following question: How do former high school dropouts view the reasons they dropped out and the reasons they returned?

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain an understanding of the motivations of those adults who have dropped out of high school and have decided to return to further their education in an adult school setting.

The method of conducting this study from a qualitative angle was interviewing individuals who are currently enrolled in an adult education program. Although not conclusive, personal experience is important to gaining an understanding of this population and their views on the reasons that led them to drop out of high school.

The results of this study correlated with existing literature that there are many factors that lead to high school dropouts. Because this was a qualitative study, the individual reasons given for dropping out of high school support the statistics and research already in existence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have helped me during the process of conducting my research, thus concluding with this written thesis.

First, I would like to thank the participants of this study. Your knowledge, expertise, honesty, and life experiences helped shape this project and made it very real. A special thank you to Principal Todd Haag, who helped in so many ways during the process of my research.

Next, I would like to thank Dr. Cory Dennis for taking time to help me formulate this project, pushing and supporting me to the very end. I wouldn't have made it through this project without your insight and input.

Finally, thank you to my wonderful and supportive family. These past three years have led me on a wonderfully tough journey and it was only possible by having all of you by my side every step of the way. Thank you for sharing in this huge accomplishment with me! I love you all.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

There has been much research conducted regarding high school dropout prevention and identifying risk factors that influence those who choose to leave school early. Although research shows that life can become very difficult economically and socially for high school dropouts, some adults decide to return to further their education after many years away from a school setting. The following will highlight existing dropout prevention programs, gaps that have not been covered in the literature, and the importance of qualitative research regarding the topic of high school dropouts.

Problem Statement

Annual high school dropout rates have been in a continual decline since 1990. The dropout rate represents the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalent credential, such as the GED) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The dropout rate declined from 12 percent in 1990 to seven percent in 2011 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Although high school dropout rates are steadily declining, research pertaining to the causes of dropping out are still essential when implementing preventative measures.

Presently, there are prevention programs in existence that target dropping out of school. Kemp, 2006, states that the two main reasons that students drop out of school are either due to academic failure or being disengaged in school. Failing classes, grade retention, and frequent absences can be attributed to the first of these categories. Lack of involvement in school functions and extracurricular activities are connected to disengagement from the educational environment.

Statistics and other quantitative research show the number of students that drop out of school annually, however, little research has been conducted from a qualitative angle on the perceptions of students who have dropped out of school in the past and have now reenrolled as adults, specifically those over the age of 24. Concerns about high school dropout have led to studies of early school leaving. These studies have described dropout populations and stimulated ideas about the best ways to prevent dropout.

This study was designed to initiate further research that will expand understanding of high school dropouts by examining a range of perceptions of students who have dropped out previously and who have reenrolled as adults now completing their education. Although dropping out can be viewed as an individual decision, "early school leaving is embedded within a complex array of family, peer, relationship, work, school, and individual psychological processes" (Jozefowicz, 2003, p. 2). Specific questions regarding gender, race, family income, parent education, and peer groups will refine the

understanding of school dropout and groups in order to develop more effective and efficient dropout prevention curriculums.

Little is known regarding the feelings and reasons of those who have dropped out. Questions regarding why students have left school, their experiences since they have left, and what could have been done to prevent their leaving are just some of the directions to delve into when studying this area, as it has not been dissected in detail previously. This angle is important to research because there are many specific reasons why individuals drop out. Understanding and taking each reason into consideration when creating prevention programs will provide additional support for programs in schools.

Although there has been much previous research about dropouts, dropout prevention, and factors contributing to dropping out, further information is still needed. The perspectives and individualized experiences of previous dropouts are lacking in today's research regarding this important topic. Through understanding the perception of dropping out of high school of those that have and how it can be addressed, the following research questions were addressed in this study: (1) what led to each individual dropping out of high school?; (2) what could have been implemented that would have prevented each individual from dropping out?; and (3) what has led them, as adults, to reenroll in an educational environment?; (4) what do former high school dropouts view as the reasons they dropped out and the reasons they returned?

Although each individual gave their own personal perception of dropping out and how it has led them to this specific point in life, similarities between the characteristics were identified throughout the research process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain an understanding of the motivations of those adults who have dropped out of high school and have decided to return to further their education in an adult school setting. By investigating the changes that occurred between the time of dropping out and their current enrolled status, the information elicited can be used to strengthen existing data regarding this population and inform strategies to help a higher percentage of former drop-outs successfully completing their high school education and achieving the goals they set out to attain.

Regarding high school dropout rates, theories, and studies conducted, the following will illustrate how the research was conducted regarding the perspectives of high school dropouts and their reenrollment in school. The sample consisted of individuals over the age of 24 who are currently enrolled in adult education programs and who are students who have previously dropped out of high school.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

A school social worker can be instrumental in helping to prevent school dropouts (Jozefowicz, 2008). They can be involved in implementing, maintaining, and monitoring the creation and integration of services for young adolescents. With the right training and institutional supports, school social workers can promote student and school success and can increase the knowledge of effective prevention efforts. Gaining insight from personal experiences of adults who have dropped out of school in the past, can be used to help construct more efficient and effective prevention programs. Research from this standpoint needs elaboration in order to truly understand the characteristics of dropping out of school, as well as the factors that contributed to reenrollment. This study provides additional support for the field of social work, providing more information about students who are at risk of dropping out and how these factors are connected to the educational system.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

High school dropouts and prevention has been researched largely from a quantitative angle. There has been much research conducted concerning this population, resulting in a large amount of literature. The following is a review of the literature regarding high school dropout prevention and interventions, how it can be applied in a social context, and the methodological limitations of studies previously conducted. Additionally, the theoretical concept of self-efficacy theory will be discussed to show how motivation and perceived capabilities of achievement are important factors.

Dropout Prevention and Interventions

It is often noted that educational failure and lack of educational opportunities are the first among many disappointments for those who are at risk for delinquency or school failure. This can lead to high-risk behaviors such as dropping out of school, abusing substances, and becoming involved in other criminal activities (Phillips, 2013). Therefore, it is important to find ways to assist the educational system to help young students avoid high-risk behaviors. In turn, "our educational system must also capitalize on the knowledge and positive experiences that contribute to the academic success of at-risk youth" (Phillips, 2013, p. 669). Understanding both prevention and

working to enhance positive experiences for students help educators create appropriate curricula and learning experiences for each student. Creating a positive learning environment and encouraging academic achievement is an important factor in promoting high school completion, whether in a mainstream school setting or an alternative school setting. Furthermore, through understanding and acknowledging that each situation has different motivating factors, it is important to gain an understanding of personal experiences of those who have dropped out of high school.

Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) state there are a number of factors that lead to a decision for a student to drop out of school, which in turn, leads to a great cost to both the student and society; these include lower earning, higher likelihood of unemployment, and greater likelihood of health problems. These factors, therefore, may motivate adults to return to school to complete their education later in life. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) also conclude that the first step in addressing high school dropout rates is to understand the characteristics and lives of students most at risk of leaving school early. There have been many post-drop out surveys conducted, as well as interviews with those who have dropped out. However, there is a need to understand what leads those students back to school to complete their education. Once this information is attained, perhaps a more efficient intervention can be developed so that fewer students must go through the process of dropping out and reenrolling.

One aspect of research that has been conducted concerns students who are not considered disabled, yet "the needs of students with disabilities have not been addressed" (Kemp, 2006, p. 237). This is a gap in research regarding dropouts that should be addressed, especially from the perspective of those who were diagnosed with a learning disability, or those who were diagnosed later in life.

Research has shown that the more involved students are in the educational environment, the less chance there is of those students dropping out of school. The key is to start engaging students in school activities early on. Suggestions include to refrain from holding students back from progressing to the next grade, tailoring programs to students' needs, creating a mix of academic and extracurricular experiences, providing students opportunities for success in a supportive and caring learning environment, and providing counseling services (Kemp, 2006). School districts have acknowledged the issue of students dropping out of school, and while there are many forms of prevention programs being implemented, there are still gaps in the research, such as the knowledge of individualized experiences, that have left this topic underdeveloped.

<p align="center">Social Context</p>

In today's social context, the consequences of leaving school without a diploma are costly. Economically, employment rates have dropped over the past few years, making jobs scarce and the market extremely competitive.

School districts and communities have realized that the more marketable one is, the more likely one is to find employment. Due to the shift from blue collar to white collar jobs in our economy, there are fewer jobs available to those who have dropped out of high school (Jozefowicz, 2003).Research indicates that one in ten students between the ages of 16 and 24 in the United States fail to complete high school (Poyrazli et al., 2008). This is a crucial age in development and can shape the course of life when making such a drastic decision. Although prevention efforts must be implemented for those contemplating dropping out, understanding the factors that contribute to this decision may be more helpful. By gaining the perspective of adults who are returning to school and have lived with the experience of dropping out earlier in life, it is possible that prevention programs can become more effective and efficient.

<div align="center">Methodological Limitations</div>

As stated above, numerous studies have been conducted from a quantitative standpoint in order to target the reasoning behind dropping out of school and prevention, which has been both informative and instructive. By combining this information with perspectives gathered from a qualitative standpoint, "analyzing individual dropout stories allows a rich, person-centered analysis of the factors that contribute to early school leaving by viewing dropout from the perspective of the individual rather than a compilation of variables" (Jozefowicz, 2003, p. 2-3).

On an individual level, the goal was to identify ways of intervening in the dropout process. There is much quantitative data regarding contributing factors to dropping out, prevention factors, and statistics, but there is a lack of qualitative data conducted that could exemplify, elaborate, and elucidate the quantitative results and help assist future initiatives regarding prevention. By analyzing each specific individual from a general systems perspective, a wider understanding of contributing factors to students dropping out will help practitioner and professionals provide appropriate assistance and resources to those at-risk (Jozefowicz, 2003).If this perspective is encouraged, one will see that there are many environmental factors that can contribute to further prevention of dropping out of school.

<div align="center">Theories Guiding Conceptualization</div>

Self-efficacy refers to perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated levels (Schunk, 2009). It has been shown to be a powerful influence on an individual's motivation, achievement, and self-regulation. Specifically, in education, "it has been shown to affect students' choices of activities, effort expended, persistence, interest, and achievement" (Schunk, 2009, p. 35). From the position of those who have dropped out of school, this theory defines the problem as students who doubt their capabilities to learn or perform well. In turn, however, by reenrolling in school, adults increase their self-efficacy and initiate their persistence in

completing their education. They are taking more interest in achievement and putting more effort into completing what they did not when they dropped out.

Self-efficacy theory is situated in the social cognitive theory of human functioning, which results from a dynamic interplay among personal, behavioral, and environmental influences (Schunk, 2009). Schunk (2009) states that through self-reflection, people make sense of their experiences, explore their cognitions and beliefs, engage in self-evaluation, and thus alter their thinking. This theory directly relates to the perspective of those who have dropped out of high school. Those interviewed were able to reflect on certain decisions that were made and why they made the decision to drop out in the first place. Developed by Bandura (1997), self-efficacy theory is not directly translated into judgments of competence. Individuals interpret the results of events, and these interpretations provide the information on which judgments are based.

This theory is specific in stating that although self-efficacy is an important factor, it is not the only influence. Student's values also can affect behavior, as well as outcome expectations, which are important factors to understand and account for when studying and researching students. Applying this theory to the study of perceptions of high school dropouts can help build interventions that can be used in targeting and preventing dropping out of high school. Therefore, understanding self-efficacy can explain why they dropped out and how they came to reenroll in school at this point in life.

It can be argued that recurring overestimation by students of their own capabilities can lead to continued failure, with resulting loss of interest in students' motivation to learn. Correspondingly, this can lead to increased risk in dropping out. The fear of failure can be influential in whether an individual will continue to try at certain tasks.

Although different theories can be applied when studying the topic of high school dropouts and their perspectives on factors influencing this decision, Self-Efficacy Theory fits within the scope of qualitatively analyzing the progression from dropping out of high school to reenrolling in school as adults.

Summary

The perception of dropping out of high school from adults who have is lacking in current research. The more that is understood about the factors that contributed to dropping out, what would have helped prevent individuals from dropping out, and what has led to individuals reenrolling in school as adults will help further construct more effective and efficient forms of prevention. Understanding that each circumstance is different, yet identifying similarities will be beneficial as supportive data for further studies regarding dropout rates and intervention programs. Another possible benefit is that those who participate in the study may gain personal knowledge and reflect on their own experience, which may lead to an increase in self-efficacy.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Literature has shown that the gaps in research regarding high school dropouts should be addressed through conducting further research. The following will cover the study design, how the sample was identified and the selection criteria, data collection and instruments that were used to conduct the study, as well as how the data was gathered. Due to the nature of the study, protection of human subjects will be discussed, as well has how the data was analyzed.

Study Design

As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to understand further the reasons of those adults who have dropped out of high school and who have returned to further their education in an adult school setting. Based on the gaps presented in the literature, research conducted qualitatively would be beneficial regarding the population of dropouts and how they have come to return to school. Benefits include individualized reasons for students dropping out of school, molding prevention programs to better serve the students, and taking each student as an individual, rather than generalizing their struggles. The information gained from interviewing those who have previously dropped out of school can be used to strengthen the existing data.

The method of conducting this study from a qualitative angle was interviewing individuals who are currently enrolled in an adult education program. Although not conclusive, personal experience is important to gaining an understanding of this population and their views on the reasons that led them to drop out of high school. The purpose of this study was to answer the following question: How do former high school dropouts view the reasons they dropped out and the reasons they returned?

Sampling

Communication was initiated with the principal of an adult school regarding the prospect of conducting this study among a sample of their adult students. After discussing the study, the principal agreed to allow research to be conducted based on individuals enrolled in the school that are willing to volunteer their time to be interviewed. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the process. No names or specific identifying information were asked during the research process.

A target sample of eight-ten interviewees, being of the age twenty-four or older, was the goal for this specific research study. This sample from this adult school was chosen due to accessibility and location. The only requirements were that they were currently enrolled in the adult school to complete their education, and that they have previously dropped out of high school without completing their primary education. The fact that the adult school has been active for a significant amount of time is also beneficial for the

purpose of this study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and consented to participate.

Data Collection and Instruments

Due to this study being qualitative, the data collected was based on individual interviews conducted with students who are currently enrolled in the adult school.

The two instruments that were used for this study are located in Appendix A. The first set of questions was comprised of demographic information. Questions referenced information such as: age, ethnic origin, highest level of high school completed, marital status, employment status, household income, religious affiliation, and geographic location. An interview guide was also used (Appendix A). The general outline of this interview was structured around three basic questions: (1) What led to you dropping out of high school?; (2) In your opinion, what could have prevented you from dropping out?; (3) What led you to enroll in school to complete your education now? Probing questions followed up these questions.

Each interviewee was given a number as an identifier; there were no names, addresses, or phone numbers used on the instrument. The purpose of using a semi-structured instrument was to allow the interview to take its course without being too structured and outlined. The purpose of this was to gain the perspective of the individual; therefore it was structured more like a conversation. General questions asked were: (1) What led to the decision to

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drop out of high school?; (2) What could have helped prevent the decision to drop out?; (3) What has occurred since then that caused the individual to return and complete their education? As each of these questions were answered, probing questions were filled in to gain more information regarding the reasons and motivations each interviewee had.

Procedures

The data gathered were procured initially through communication with the principal of an adult school. Once consent was given to conduct the research by interviewing students at the school, the principal announced the study to the school and asked for volunteers who met the requirements if they were open to participating in an interview. This was conducted through reaching out to teachers at the school, who broached the research to their classes. At this point, teachers asked for volunteers and passed along the email addresses of the students to the principal of the adult school, who then passed along the list, through email, to the researcher. The principal contacted the interviewer through email or phone number to relay the interview times available for the students and where the interviews would take place. The topic of the study was given to each student in order to inform him or her of the purpose of the study.

The data collection took place in a private area on the campus of the school during school hours, which was most convenient for the interviewees. Prior to starting the interview, an initial consent form (Appendix B) was signed.

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewee was asked to answer the demographic questions. Once completed, the interview began. Each interview was tape-recorded and each was labeled according to the number given to the interviewee. The recordings will be locked in a drawer when not in use and will be destroyed when the study is completed.

Protection of Human Subjects

As stated above, confidentiality and anonymity was paramount in this study, due to the direct questioning of individuals. Informed consent and a debriefing statement (Appendix C) were given to each volunteer interviewee upon entering into the study. At this time, a number was given as an identifier to each interviewee in order to maintain confidentiality. Since tape-recording interviews was an option, each tape-recording was given a number that corresponded with the interviewee. To protect the human subjects in this study, data was kept in a locked cabinet at the interviewer's home until the study was completed. Upon completion of analysis, the tape recordings were deleted.

Data Analysis

Due to the length of interviews, notes were taken by hand as well as tape-recorded to analyze at a later time. The tape recordings were then transcribed.

After all data had been collected and the interviews transcribed, it was analyzed by reading each transcription and correlated to find similarities among the interviews and demographic information. Additionally, the interviewer will identify similarities and differences manually from the transcriptions of the interviews.

Summary

Because existing research has gaps regarding the high school dropout population, this study will help fill those gaps by providing additional qualitative data from the perspective of adult students who previously dropped out of high school. For this study, the sample population involved was a key component to filling those gaps. The above-mentioned shows how the sample was chosen, what the interviewees were asked, and how the data was analyzed.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The following will discuss the findings of the study conducted at an adult school. Similarities and correlations between participants will be addressed, as well as individual experiences discussed throughout the interviews. Because each participant shared their own personal story, there are some variables that came to light through the interview process. This section will first discuss the demographic information given by each participant, followed by interpretation of the data from each individual interview.

Presentation of the Findings

As displayed in Table 1, the demographics of the participants show that each participant was over the age of twenty-four. Most of the participants disclosed that they were in their late thirties to early fifties at the date of each interview. Two participants disclosed that they are divorced; two stated that they are separated; four stated they are currently married.

Diversity is displayed in Table 1 with four participants identifying as Hispanic or Latino, two participants identifying as Black or African American, and two participants identifying as White.

Table 1. Demographics

	Age	Ethnicity	Highest Grade Completed	Marital Status	Employment Status	Income	Religious Affiliation	GEO. Location
PART. 1	38	White	11th	Divorced	Homemaker/ Student	$40,000-$50,000	Christian	Rancho Cucamonga
PART. 2		Black or African American	9th	Separated	Employed full-time	$10,000-$20,000	Christian	Rancho Cucamonga
PART. 3	47	Hispanic or Latino	11th	Divorced	Out of work	Less than $10,000	Catholic	Rancho Cucamonga
PART. 4	55	White	11th	Married	Employed part-time	$30,000-$40,000	Christian	Upland
PART. 5	46	Black or African American	11th	Married	Homemaker/ Student	Higher than $50,000	Christian	Rancho Cucamonga
PART. 6	29	Hispanic or Latino	11th	Married	Out of Work	Less than $10,000	Catholic	Montclair
PART. 7	37	Hispanic or Latino	No grade of high school	Married	Homemaker	$40,000-$50,000	Catholic	Rancho Cucamonga
PART. 8	51	Hispanic or Latino	9th	Separated	Unable to work	$10,000-$20,000	Catholic	Ontario

As Table 1 shows, five out of eight participants disclosed that they are not employed at this time. Range of income varies as well, depending on the situation that each individual is in. Every participant identified as either Christian or Catholic.

The interviews conducted revealed many factors that led each individual to dropping out of high school and that influenced them to return to complete their education. One participant who had moved around a lot when she was younger stated, "I felt like I was different because there was no stability. There was no anything. If someone had paid attention and cared then

I could see that being a factor in not dropping out. But it didn't happen that way" (Participant 1, survey interview, April 2015). Another participant stated something similar: "My mom was abusive. I had a dysfunctional family. I thought I was grown and felt unloved and I felt unworthy. There was no stability at home" (Participant 2, survey interview, April 2015). Other participants voiced similar statements. Because of this, we can conclude that having a stable living environment was a critical factor in determining whether or not the student dropped out of high school.

In regards to what led to the participants dropping out of high school, six out of eight participants (75%)disclosed that they are products of single-parent households as well as claim to have had no school/counselor support before dropping out of high school. Six out of eight participants (75%) also stated that there was either drug or alcohol impact while growing up and was a factor in them dropping out. Seven out of eight participants (87.5%) claim that they did not have a stable nor supportive living environment growing up. One participant stated, "there have to be limits in order and there has to be some sort of foundation and structure in order for a person to be ale to thrive to the upmost of their potential" (Participant 5, survey interview, April 2015). Only two out of eight (25%) state that the main reason they dropped out of school was due to family financial hardships, when they went to work to help provide for their families.

In regards to factors that could have helped prevent each participant from dropping out, there were some common factors identified. Four out of eight participants (50%) stated that if there were school support or help from a school counselor, it would have helped keep them on track and prevent them from dropping out. "I feel like I fell through the cracks at school. No one cared what I did" (Participant 3, survey interview, April 2015). These were common phrases throughout the interviews that support the idea that counselors and school support are critical in keeping students on track. Five out of eight participants (62.5%) stated that if someone cared or taken an interest in them at home or at school, then they might not have dropped out. Four out of eight participants (50%) stated that if they had some sort of structure at home or a different family environment then that would have helped prevent them from dropping out of school.

Other factors that were identified were on an individual basis. For some, if peer changes had been made at the time of dropping out or if family financial stability had been established early on, this would have been an influential factor that would have prevented them from dropping out. One other participant stated that nothing could have prevented them from dropping out.

When asked what led to the participants in re-enrolling in adult education, the unanimous answer was job/career-related. "I want a better job" (Participant 2, survey interview, April 2015), "I want to move further up in the field" (Participant 6, survey interview, April 2015), "they wouldn't hire me

without having my GED or diploma" (Participant 4, survey interview, April 2015), or "I needed a back-up plan" (Participant 8, survey interview, April 2015) were some of the statements made by participants when asked why they finally decided to re-enroll in adult education. Four out of eight participants stated that in order to find a job now, a GED or diploma was needed. Three others stated that they needed their GED or diploma in order to move up in their current jobs. One participant stated that he has the opportunity to come back to school now and likes learning, which was their main factor in returning to the education system.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the information given by each individual participant regarding both the demographic information and the individual interviews that were conducted. Common factors for what led each student to dropping out of high school, what could have prevented each student from dropping out of high school, and what led each student to enroll in adult education were stated and grouped together according to category. The above-mentioned gives a concise understanding of the interviews that took place, drawing off of personal experiences from each individual's life.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study provides specific data regarding the reasons that students drop out of high school. The results show the identifying factors that influenced students who had dropped out of high school and what has led them to enroll in adult education. The following chapter will discuss how the results of this study can impact current preventative measures implemented in school settings. Limitations of the study as well as strengths will also be discussed. Finally, recommendations for future social work practice and research will be reviewed.

Discussion

Factors from the demographic questionnaire during this study presented similarities among the students who participated. There was a wide range of defining factors, such as marital status, ethnicity, and employment status. This information was utilized to delve further into individual characteristics during the interviews. The greatest concern, according to the participants, was the fact that they felt the need to return to school because they either could not apply for higher paying jobs, or they were let go due to not having a GED or diploma.

Frustratingly for the participants, many had multiple years of experience, but due to their lack of GED or diploma, could not move further up in their vocation. It was found that although experience is an important factor when finding a career, it is just as important to have a degree.

The similarities identified from each interview validate the idea that having support at home and school is critical in keeping students engaged and stable. Living in a stable environment was a major factor identified during the interviews that would have helped prevent the participants from dropping out of high school.

Simply stated, the general answers to the initial interview questions are as follows: (1) 1) what led to each individual dropping out of high school? *Participants that lived in an unstable environment, many living in single parent homes, or lack of a counselor at school stated this was the main reason they dropped out*; (2) what could have been implemented that would have prevented each individual from dropping out?; *Participants stated that having someone who cared enough to check on them and make sure they were on the right track would have helped prevent them from dropping out of high school;* (3) what has led them, as adults, to reenroll in an educational environment? *Participants stated that many jobs are requiring a diploma or GED in order to get hired, or they are unable to promote at their current job due to the lack of a degree*. Although the interviews presented other factors as well, these were the most common answers that were given.

As stated in Chapter 1, "early school leaving is embedded within a complex array of family, peer, relationship, work, school, and individual psychological processes" (Jozefowicz, 2003, p. 2). Each participant stated that one of the abovementioned processes influenced their decision to drop out of high school. In fact, many of the students claim to have been influenced by more than one process mentioned.

Not only did factors outside of the school setting effect participants to drop out of high school, but many felt that they would have stayed in school if someone at their school had taken an interest in them. Therefore, "our educational system must also capitalize on the knowledge and positive experiences that contribute to the academic success of at-risk youth" (Phillips, 2013, p. 669). If this concept can be applied directly to at-risk youth, chances are that the rates of high school dropouts will decrease. Integrating school social worker into the education system would be beneficial, providing resources to students and their families, as well as identifying risk factors and protective factors of students.

In Chapter 2 it was noted by Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) that there are a number of factors that lead to a decision for a student to drop out of school, which in turn, leads to a great cost to both the student and society; these include lower earning, higher likelihood of unemployment, and greater likelihood of health problems. These factors, therefore, may motivate adults to return to school to complete their education later in life. The interviews

conducted during this study show that there is a great cost to those who drop out of high school. Many of the participants stated that they are unable to move up in their field due to a lack of a GED or diploma. Some are even unable to find work because of this decision.

The literature available on the topic of high school dropouts does correlate with the findings of this study, though more on an individual and personal level. The literature supports the idea that there are many individual factors that lead to students dropping out of high school, as well as preventative measures that can decrease the number of high school dropouts in the future.

Limitations

Limitations for this study include the argument that personal experiences are based on an individual level and cannot be attributed to an entire population, as well as that the sample size is small (N = 8) and in a concentrated area, rather then from several different geographic areas.

Recognizing and identifying protective factors for those at risk of dropping out of high school has been the goal of much previous research on this topic. However, this study was limited to identifying risk factors and indicators, without really identifying protective factors for each individual. Another limitation for this study is that this study was conducted on one adult school campus, with the majority of students completing their GED, not their diploma. Because the goal of this study was to have participants of a certain

age or above, diploma completion was inefficient and would take a longer time to complete.

Although the above mentioned are valid limitations, there are also strengths that stem from this study. Participants had the opportunity to reflect on their life experiences and were able to identify the factors that influenced the choice they made when they dropped out of high school. This promotes empowerment and self-efficacy of each individual by validating their experiences and encouraging them to continue making the changes that are important for them. Another strength about this study is that it provides support for research that is already available on the topic of high school dropouts.

Although conducting individual interviews with participants can be viewed as a limitation, it can also be viewed as a strength. Providing individual experiences as support to quantitative research validates the factors that influence the choice to drop out of high school. The fact that participants were willing to be honest about their experiences seemed very cathartic and therapeutic.

Recommendations for Social Work
Practice, Policy and Research

To address the most concerning risk factors that led to the participants to drop out of high school, future research includes identifying and promoting the usage of school counselors and school social workers. From the results of this study, it was clear that lack of information, resources, and lack of school

interest in each individual was a big influence for those who decided to drop out. Therefore, by utilizing counselors and social workers to the fullest potential in school districts, preventative measures will be more effective and efficient due to engaging with each individual student.

Identifying existing prevention programs that are thriving in schools districts is another recommendation. School social workers are becoming more common, however, programs are still developing and being modified in order to reach the highest number of students and families. Another recommendation includes researching the rates of high school dropouts for those who are disabled. During the course of this study, one out of the eight participants identified themselves as physically disabled. This is an area that should be further research with prevention programs adapted for both the physically and mentally disabled students who have dropped out of high school or are contemplating dropping out.

Conclusions

In conclusion, utilizing individual experiences of those who have dropped out provides critical information when developing prevention programs, identifying risk and protective factors, and utilizing counselors and social workers to their fullest potential in school districts. Similarities can be correlated and generalize, however, the process of understanding individual experiences makes the student feel their story is worth sharing, especially if it can help create more opportunities for future generations. Although the

limitations of this study are valid, the process of interviews created a safe environment for the participants to feel heard, accepted, and important. The realization that each individual story was relevant and could help change the course of prevention programs was evident at the conclusion of each interview. Most of all, processing their own stories was cathartic and helped each participant understand their path that led them to this place in life.

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. What is your age? _____

2. Ethnic Origin (or Race). Please specify
   a. White
   b. Hispanic or Latino
   c. Black or African American
   d. Native American or American Indian
   e. Asian/Pacific Islander
   f. Other: _____

3. What is the highest level of high school you have completed?
   a. No grade of high school completed
   b. 9th grade
   c. 10th grade
   d. 11th grade

4. What is your marital status?
   a. Single, never married
   b. Married or domestic partnership
   c. Widowed
   d. Divorced
   e. Separated

5. Employment Status: Are you currently…?
   a. Employed for wages part-time
   b. Employed for wages full-time
   c. Self-employed
   d. Out of work and looking for work
   e. Out of work but not currently looking for work
   f. A homemaker
   g. A student
   h. Retired
   i. Unable to work

6. Household income: What was the total combined income for your family in 2013?
   a. Less than $10,000
   b. $10,000-$20,000
   c. $20,000-$30,000
   d. $30,000-$40,000
   e. $40,000-$50,000
   f. Higher than $50,000

7. What is your religious affiliation?
   a. Christian
   b. Catholic
   c. Jewish
   d. Muslim
   e. Hindu
   f. Buddhist
   g. Other: _____
   h. No affiliation
   i. Prefer not to answer

8. Geographic location: Which city do you live in?
   a. Ontario
   b. Montclair
   c. Chino
   d. Upland
   e. Rancho Cucamonga
   f. Pomona
   g. Claremont
   h. Fontana
   i. Other: _____

Interview Questions

1. What led you to dropping out of high school?

2. What, in your opinion, could have prevented you from dropping out?

3. What has led you to enroll again in school to complete your education?

**Additional probing questions will be asked, as the interview commences, that will depend on the previous answers and information given by each individual participant.

Developed by Cristina Brooks

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate the reasons that participants have dropped out of high school, what could have prevented them from dropping out, and why they have returned to complete their education in an adult school setting. This study is being conducted by Cristina Grace Brooks under the supervision of Dr. Cory Dennis, Assistant Professor of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to understand the motivations of those who have dropped out of high school and have decided to return to an adult school to complete their education. Understanding the changes that occurred from the time they dropped out to being enrolled in an adult school setting will provide first hand knowledge of what it was like to drop out and what it was like to return to a school setting.

DESCRIPTION: This study will be conducted through an individual interview process. The participant will be asked to fill out one survey, which will ask questions based on demographics. After the first survey is complete, the participant will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher. There will be some standard questions and then, depending on answers given, other questions will be asked in regards to the participants' individual experience.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation is completely voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may skip or not answer any questions and can freely withdraw from participation at any time.

CONFIDENTIAL: This research will be confidential. Although the researcher will know the names of participants, the information recorded and written will be confidential. Each participant will be assigned an identifying number, which will be labeled on each survey and noted in each interview. No names will be mentioned on the survey or on the tape-recording. Numbers will suffice as identifiers. Each recording will be labeled by number and stored in a locked home safe when not being analyzed. When the study is complete, the tape recordings will be destroyed and the transcriptions and surveys shredded to protect confidentiality.

DURATION: The initial survey, which is based on demographic information, will be allotted 5 minutes to complete by each participant. Each corresponding interview will be conducted for 45 minutes.

RISKS: There is a possibility that an interview topic or question may be sensitive to the participant. If this occurs, the participant can ask to move onto the next question without being pushed to answer by the researcher. As the topic is based on past events, the researcher will maintain sensitivity as the interview progresses.

BENEFITS: There are no benefits that are foreseen in this study, other than possibly opening up an opportunity for the participants themselves to understand how they reached this point in their lives.

VIDEO/AUDIO/PHOTOGRAPH:

I understand that this research will be audio recorded Initials_____

CONTACT: If there are any questions about the above research or research subjects' rights, please contact Dr. Cory Dennis, Professor of Social Work at (909) 537-3501 or cdennis@csusb.edu

RESULTS: If the results of this study would like to be viewed, you may contact the School of Social Work office located in the Social and Behavioral Sciences Building, Room 423 of California State University, San Bernardino. The address is 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407.

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT:

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

SIGNATURE:

X _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Debriefing Statement

This study you have just completed was designed to investigate decision-making processes, specifically related to dropping out of high school and re-entering into an adult education program. In this study two decision biases were assessed: How the decision was made to drop out of high school and how that decision framed consecutive decisions that have led participants to this point in life. These two decision biases often unconsciously influence our everyday decisions. The questionnaire that was distributed at the start of the interview included questions pertaining to individual traits and measures, whereas the interview questions themselves were asked as hindsight questions and to provide additional pieces of information that influenced choices that were made after dropping out of high school. We are particularly interested in the relationship between these two decision biases to see how each individual student has been affected and views their past decisions.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of the decision question with other students. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact **Dr. Cory Dennis** at **(909) 537-3501**. If you would like to obtain a copy of the results of this study, please contact the John M. Pfau library of California State University, San Bernardino at the end of **Spring** Quarter of 2015.

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